Baltimore's Garment Industry and the Jewish Community

By Talia Smith

It's easy to dismiss family ancestors as lifeless names on tombstones or census records. Sometimes you know a story or two. Maybe a cookbook survived, or a religious text or, even rarer, a singular family photograph. Even though most people know that their family members of old must have done something with their time, often it is hard to imagine what exactly that was.

While searching through the census records of B'nai Israel's original congregants, there was a professional trend. Many listed a variation of "garment" as their profession. One such member was William Caplan who emigrated from Russia with his wife, Frieda, in the early 20th century.

Like many of his neighbors, William Caplan was a tailor by trade, more specifically, a men's coat maker at a factory. Caplan would have been working in the garment industry from around 1910-1939, the industry's height. According to the Baltimore Sun, "in 1920, 27,000 workers made their living in the menswear factories here [in Baltimore.]" In turn of the century Baltimore, the city's garment industry was second only to New York City but unlike New York, Baltimore's garment industry focused predominantly on utilitarian menswear.

The garment industry began to make a name for itself during the Civil War when Baltimore was making uniforms for both the Union and Confederate armies. Called "slop suites" these uniforms came in small, medium, and large but the sizes were not standardized and looked rather sloppy, thus "slop suites." It was because of this the government began an effort to take measurement statistics and standard sizes were born.

In the early days, the garment industry was dominated by the German Jewish community during their mid 19th century immigration peak. According to historian Isaac M. Fein, "clothing was the major industry in which Jews excelled." One such German Jewish immigrant, Moses Wiesenfeld, came to Baltimore in 1838 and began a wholesale clothing company in 1849. The company, Moses Wiesenfeld & Co., became the leader of the wholesale garment industry. Baltimore's garment industry gave Jewish business owners the opportunity to employ within the Jewish communities.

A generation later, Russian Jews, like Caplan, began to enter Baltimore. Between 1881 and 1890, over 24,000 Russian Jews landed in the city. Unfortunately, rifts between German Jews and Russian Jews created tensions within the industry. Because German immigrants were established in Baltimore for longer, many of the German Jewish business owners were hostile towards the more recent immigrants and "exploited their Russian Jewish workers." In 1901, there were roughly 400 sweatshops in East Baltimore which mainly employed Russian immigrants.

Like most sweatshops, the conditions in these factories were dangerous and the work grueling. The downtown area of Baltimore did not have electricity until 1881, so before that, not only were the factories hazardous, they were dark and all work was to be done by hand. In addition, the garment industry was a family affair. During the early years, men would cut fabric in the

factories, bring them home for their wives to sew, and finally bring the pieces back to the factory for finishing touches. Eventually, women and children joined the men inside the factories to centralize the business. It is estimated that 20% of all the city workers worked in the garment industry in the early 20th century, a majority of those Jewish. While it can not be known for certain, it is plausible that William Caplan could have been working in one of the many factories that were exploitative.

World War One was great for the menswear business and Baltimore thrived by making uniforms and contributing to the war effort. The Great Depression hit in 1929 and by 1931 one of the major garment factories in Baltimore, Henry Sonneborn & Co, closed its doors. Despite that, work was relatively stable for the factory worker. In the mid thirties, shops began to unionize, slowly improving conditions within the factories. While the industry peaked during the Great War, the second World War saw its demise. Unfortunately, Baltimore's Garment industry lacked government orders during World War Two, resulting in the industry taking a major hit from which it would not recover.

In 1940, William Caplan seems to have left his tailoring behind to work as a General Repair Laborer. While it is impossible to know why, it is plausible that his job fell victim to the demise of the industry. All was not lost though, and despite the loss of the garment industry, the Caplan Family thrived. Within the coming years, his sons fought in and survived World War Two, his daughters worked as switchboard operators (a very prestigious position at the time) and private secretaries. All of his children were married and lived long lives. By the time William Caplan died on July 30th, 1953, he was survived by all of his children, fifteen grandchildren, and one great grandchild. More than just a name on a paper, William Caplan is one of many B'nai Israel members who contributed to Baltimore's historic garment industry.

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